

Interfaith Café

Excerpts from “Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening: A Guide to Enrich Your Relationships and Kindle Your Spiritual Practice” by Kay Lindahl, published by SkyLight Paths.

The Interfaith Café grew out of the hunger for small group dialogue. My twelve years of experience in interfaith work and events have taught me that the most meaningful experiences occur in small groups. The energy and excitement generated is almost palpable. “Let’s do this more often!” is a common response. What we’ve discovered is that we need some help to get this kind of conversation going. The Interfaith Café was designed to provide a minimum amount of structure and a safe space. It draws on the work of Juanita Brown and David Isaacs and The World Café.

The room is set up in small circles of from four to six chairs. Place some note pads or 3x5 cards and pens in the center of each circle. In order to ensure that people sit with others they don’t know, either number or label each small group. As participants arrive, have them pick a number or name to determine where they will sit. Most people find this a comfortable way to form diverse groups.

You might find it helpful to create one or two questions for the groups to use as they begin the conversation. A list of some that we have used is at the end of this section.

It is useful to designate a host for each group ahead of time. If possible, have a brief training session with them prior to the start of the café and go over the principles of the café and the guidelines for hosts.

What follows is a guide to creating an interfaith café, with an introduction to the café; explanation of café etiquette; format for the day; sample time line; information on café etiquette; and guidelines for group hosts.

Introduction to Interfaith Café

Welcome to the Interfaith Café. (Introduce yourself and the hosts. Thank them.) I also want to acknowledge you for being here, for taking the time out of your busy day to spend some time in conversation. We all have many choices of how we spend our time. We are delighted that you chose to be with us today. If you brought literature to share, please use the display table. We ask that you not pass it around in your small groups.

One of the things we have learned over the past few years is the value of small group conversations. When we sit together, talk about what's important to us, our world begins to change, we become more alive, we tap into hope. Sewing circles and committees of correspondence helped birth America; conversations in cafes and salons spawned the French Revolution. Study circles created the massive changes in economic and social policies in northern Europe.

This café setting invites that kind of conversation and collective reflection. Even though we lead busy lives, with more to do than we can ever get done, something's missing. We still yearn for community. We are hungry to tell our stories. In days gone by this happened on front porches, in pubs, or coffee houses. There were unwritten rules for these conversations. No one wrote them down, and yet everyone knew the boundaries.

Today we live in one of the most diverse nations in the world. We come from all over the world and we practice a multitude of faith traditions. So to make sure that we all know the boundaries of how to be in this conversation, we have created Café Etiquette.

Explanation of Café Etiquette

There are only three guidelines:

1. Speak from your heart. Use "I" statements. This conversation is a sharing from our hearts, not a debate, so we invite you to own what you say with your language. Speak from your own experience, not from or for anyone else. Watch for "everyone knows," "we all know," "of course," or use of the word "you."

2. Listen with respect. Listen for understanding, not necessarily for agreement or belief. You don't have to agree with or believe what someone is saying to listen with respect. This also means no cross-talk and one person speaks at a time.
3. Discover and explore. Listen for patterns, themes, new questions. Notice what's being said instead of rehearsing what you are going to say. Keep an open mind. Be curious about the others. Appreciate the differences.

We chose the word *etiquette* for a reason--it is about good manners, being polite, creating a space for everyone to be heard. So we invite you to take this on in your groups and try them out for the time we are together.

Format for the Day

Each group has a café host, who has a copy of the etiquette and the questions for the dialogue.

You will begin with brief introductions, so you'll know who everyone in your circle is, where they are from and their faith tradition or spiritual path. Then you'll review the etiquette and be asked to abide by them for your conversation. Your host will state the questions and invite the dialogue to begin.

You will have forty-five minutes for everyone to speak. You'll get a five-minute warning prior to the end of the time for the first dialogue. The next five minutes will be an opportunity to notice what happened during the dialogue. What themes or patterns emerged? What new questions came up? Use the notepads or cards to write them down.

At this point two people from each group will be invited to stand up to become ambassadors to two other groups. Each ambassador will go to a different group. Those who stay will be the hosts to two ambassadors from the other groups. You will have fifteen minutes to share. Invite the ambassadors to briefly introduce themselves and to share what their group learned. Then the host group shares what they learned.

We'll take a fifteen-minute break, you'll return to your new group, and we'll repeat the process with different questions.

The final twenty minutes will be spent debriefing the café process in the large group. You will have the opportunity to post your notes on the walls, for all to see.

(When it's time to set up the ambassador process, re-state the following instructions.)

Now it's time to share what's happened in your groups. I invite two people from each group to stand up to be ambassadors. (Wait until you see people doing so. Encourage them to take the risk of going to another group. Wait until all groups have two people standing.) Each ambassador goes to a different group. In other words, the two ambassadors from each group will not be in the same group. Host groups, raise your hands until you have two ambassadors in your circle. Once you get to your new group, introduce yourselves. Host group, welcome your ambassadors. Then begin by sharing what happened in each of the groups. You have ten minutes to do this!

You will have five minutes to summarize what you learned. You can write on the notes and place them on wall boards. Then we'll have a break. Come back to the new group after the break.

Sample Timeline for 3 ½ hour session

1:30 – 2:00 PM	Registration
2:00 – 2:15 PM	Welcome and introduction to Interfaith Café
2:15 – 3:00 PM	Small group dialogues
3:00 – 3:05 PM	Look for themes, patterns, common threads
3:05 – 3:20 PM	Ambassadors and hosts
3:20 – 3:35 PM	Break
3:35 – 4:20 PM	Small group dialogues
4:20 – 4:25 PM	Notice themes, patterns, and common threads

4:25 – 4:40 PM Ambassadors and hosts

4:40 – 5:00 PM Reporting to large group

Guidelines for Café Hosts

The role of the host for the Interfaith Café is to support the conversation, not to lead or manage it. You are holding the space in which the conversation occurs. We offer these suggestions as possible ways to create this support.

1. Invite everyone to *briefly* introduce themselves: name, where they live, faith tradition or spiritual path.
2. Review the café etiquette and ask for agreement. If group has additional ideas to add, make sure all agree. Mainly we are here to learn more about each other, not to debate positions. Suggest listening for patterns or themes in the conversation, rather than rehearsing what they will say.
3. Repeat the question and invite the dialogue. No need to call on people. Allow the conversation to emerge. Some groups may want to go around the circle, others may be more comfortable with free flowing. Whatever wants to happen. Invite personal experiences, stories.
4. Time: Forty minutes for everyone to speak on the question. Invite someone to be a timer, and give the group a five-minute warning or whatever time the group would like.
5. The next five minutes is an opportunity for the group to notice if there were any themes, patterns, or threads of the conversation or new questions.
6. At this point, one or two of the group will be invited to stand up and become ambassadors; the rest will stay where they are as hosts. As a café host, please stay with your group. The ambassadors will split up and each go to a different group. The hosts will welcome the ambassadors to their groups.
7. Take a minute to do brief introductions. Then have each ambassador give a two-to-three minute summary of their group's conversation, and one of the hosts will do the same for your group.

8. Spend the last five minutes talking about what this was like and what questions or themes emerged from the conversations. Write comments on notes, one per page. Post questions on wall, flip charts, or wall boards.
9. Break, fifteen minutes. Return to this new group.
10. Repeat steps four through eight.
11. Closing: Twenty-minute debriefing with all groups--about the process and about what participants learned.
12. Invite a brief closing ritual for your small group. Acknowledge and thank them for sharing from their hearts.

Sample Questions

How do your religious beliefs influence the way you:

Have fun (entertainment, relaxation)

Choose your friends

Speak (use of jargon and slang)

Work

How do your religious beliefs influence the way you:

Pray

See the world

Make difficult choices.

What is the impact of spirituality on your everyday life?

How do I define peace?

What beliefs obstruct achievement of peace in our world?

How do I apply my faith to peace?

What is my contribution to peace and social concerns?

How can we learn to understand one another better?

What is the most difficult principle in my faith to practice?

How does my faith impact my stance on current affairs?

How does my faith affect my engagement with a secular society?

Café Etiquette

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For understanding, not necessarily to agree with or believe.

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